

**Statement of Senator Bob Graham
Country of Origin Listening Sessions
Orlando, Florida
May 14, 2003**

Welcome to sunny Florida. I am glad that USDA decided to include my home state on its list of listening session locations. Florida has had a successful country of origin labeling program since 1979 and produces all commodities covered by the legislation.

In February 2001, I, along with my colleague Senator Tim Johnson, introduced the Consumer Right to Know Act which was eventually included in the 2002 Farm Bill. This legislation is the reason why we are all here today. The Consumer Right to Know Act requires that meats, produce, fish, and peanuts be labeled with their country of origin at the point of retail sale. Consumers have shown an interest in knowing where their food comes from and the country of origin labeling program will provide them with that information.

Country of origin labeling has been voluntary, but the program will become mandatory in September 2004. It is my understanding that USDA will use comments it receives at sessions like this one to help assemble regulations for the mandatory program. I commend USDA on its efforts to reach out to America's agricultural communities and hear first hand from America's farmers.

It is important that USDA organize the country of origin labeling program in the most fair and cost effective manner possible. Many resources exist from which USDA can draw expertise and hands-on knowledge about how to best implement the program.

Producers, suppliers, and retailers are all required to keep certain records as to the commodities they produce, buy, and sell. I encourage USDA to examine these paperwork regimes and work to incorporate this new program into existing frameworks. I also encourage USDA to work closely with all affected parties to determine the least onerous procedures for ensuring that country of origin information is truthful. Workable solutions exist and USDA should incorporate them into the final program.

You and I are consumers and we will be the ultimate beneficiaries of the country of origin labeling program. There is no reason that consumers should be denied information as to where their food is grown. Country of origin labeling is the law. It is the responsibility of USDA to implement it in a fair and cost effective manner.